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ABSTRACT

This report discusses an empirical investigation of the social networks of German children in their first 5 years of life; particular attention is given to the frequency and the function of the child's social contacts with persons in his or her social environment. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire from 1033 families residing in 18 communities within North-Rhine Westfalia. Socialization functions investigated included protection, nursing or tending, emotional involvement, play, and instruction or teaching. Results suggest that children's social development can be characterized by five basic factors: (1) expansion of the social environment; (2) social segregation; (3) quantitative re-weighting; (4) qualitative changes in the function of social interactions, and (5) the child's coping strategies in reaction to social requirements. Results further indicate that relaxing the close mother-child relationship is a most important prerequisite for the child's progress in social development. The importance of the paternal function increases with the increasing age of the child, and paternal engagement with the child advances as a function of social class and degree of urbanization. The father-child relationship is subject to highly important changes which decisively influence and differentiate the conditions of social development under which children currently grow up. (RH)

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Ulrich Schmidt-Denter

CHANGES IN THE SOCIAL NETWORK SYSTEMS OF CHILDREN IN WEST GERMANY[1)]

Abstract

The topic of this study are empirical investigations on the social networks of German children in their first five years of life. The project starts from a research model related to Ecologic Developmental Psychology. It integrates the child's relations to the persons of his social environment into a complex system-approach. The structures as well as the functions of interactions are analysed and discussed relative to their importance for the child's development. Numerous indications to a far-reaching epochal change in the social conditions of children's development give rise to this posing the problem. The research results substantiate this change, especially for the father-child- and the peer-relationship. The empiric studies include the development and testing of a research instrument and the formation of a representative sample of 1033 families. The results of this comprehensive German investigation are compared with American studies. Intercultural similiarities show up as well as specific differences. The project is published with the title "Die soziale Umwelt des Kindes" by Springer Publ..

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Ulrich Schmidt-Denter

CHANGES IN THE SOCIAL NETWORK SYSTEMS OF CHILDREN IN WEST GERMANY[1)]

Summary

Subject investigation relates to an eco-psychological analysis of the current generation of children's social network system (the age group under investigation are those between one and six jears of age). Investigated were the frequency and the function of the child's social contacts to the persons in it's social enviroment.

The project under report positioned the child in the centre of its social world and specifies and defines all other persons by their place value and their importance to the respective child. We differentiated between the following categories of socialization functions:

1 - protective function
2 - nursing or tending function
3 - emotional function
4 - play function
5 - instructive or teaching function

The social network approach was extended by aspects from recent academic investigations and research, by data from official statistics and surveys into the living conditions of children in the Federal Republic of Germany.

The data were collected using a questionnaire which had been developed and laid out in three age-specific versions.

A quota of 1033 families served as representative samples.

The families themselves were resident in 18 different communities within the country of North-Rhine Westfalia.

The individual findings allow an allocating to the following aspects of the children's social pattern of interrelations:

- frequency of contact to other persons,
- performing of routine and non-routine nursing or tending activities,
- functions of social relationships and their assigning to the respective interactive partners,
- solving of problems in problematic or critical nursing or tending situations,
- developing of relationships to members of the same age-group,

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- exploration of the family-external social environment,
- ecological areas of transition, and
- difficult as well as enjoyable aspects in the course of the process of growing into a family.

The findings were scrutinized contingent on the social strata and the particular regional infrastructure.

Going by eco-psychological aspects the social developing af a child can be characterized by the following basic factors:

- expansion of the social environment,
- social segregation,
- quantitative re-weighting, and
- quality-wise functional changes in the social interrelations, and by
- the child's coping strategies in reaction to social requirements.

The characteristic features of the analysis findings and their contents were discussed in view of their developmental psychological meaning and import, particularly, taking into account any epochal changes in the children's social network systems.

Naturally, and as anticipated the mother holds the highest place value, the priority position in the child's social network, although there are no functions which are exercised by her exclusively. Consequently, we find no confirmation of a two-person-pattern or a monotropic approach on the social environment, the social network system of the child. Additionally to the emotional ties in the mother/child-relationship it is the nursing and tending function by which it is characterized in particular. The relaxing of the initially rather close contacts to the mother represents a most important prerequisite for the child's progress in social development; this freeing facilitates extensions and changes in the child's social network system.

The importance of the paternal function increases with the increasing age of the infant. The paternal engagement advances as a function of the social standing and the degree of urbanization.

Both, intensity and nature, of the father/child-relationship are subject to considerable epochal changes which decisively influence and differentiate the conditions of social development under which our modern generation of children grows up.

In addition to the controlling function and the significance of the cognitive stimulation which have already been mentioned in American research papers and which habe been accepted and confirmed as relevant for German conditions, too, the high emotional affection is

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the factor controlling the change in quality in this particular relationship.

Even in the process of adopting more and more maternal functions an increasing trend is indicated which is initially limited to the upper middle class and the city-residents.

The traditional integration of grandparents in the rearing of children now-a-days largely concentrates on temporary auxiliary nursing and tending activities in critical situations. Otherwise their assisting of the modern parent generation suffered more of a reduction than the normally regular contact to the grandchildren leads to believe. Most frequently a strong and active system of triad interactions between grandmother, mother, and child is in existence and practised only during the actual baby-stage, and in most cases its importance deteriorates rapidly after that period. The number of joint households with the grandparents and, generally, the closeness of the core-family's kinship ties are subject to considerable regional differences; both decrease with increasing degree of urbanization. The conditionally increasing opening of the familiy towards external contacts - which simultaneousely also develops into a form of dependency - affects the social behavioural pattern and the relationships of the children.

The social development of child and parents is a kind of an interaction. The birth of children, i.e. the beginning of a family necessitates an inevitably leads to a restructuring of the circle of friend and acquaintances. The higher the social level and the more intense the urbanization, the more fundamental and radical the changes. In addition to financial worries and pedagogical problems the danger of social constriction is one of the heaviest strains parents live to experience.

On the other hand, children contribute to intensifying personal bonds and the feeling of happiness; they further the developing of the own personality and of the sense of responsibility.

Limited numbers of brothers and sisters as well as the widespread lack of children of the same age in the direct neighbourhood create the need for peer-contacts in form of friendships and institutional groups. However, the import of brothers

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and sisters, of neighbourly connexions, and of kindergarden experiences in view of the social development has a particular significane of its own, it goes far beyond the mutual play function, and it can never be totally substituted by any of the others. The relationship with the brothers and sisters is characterized by a very specific quality of the bonding, the learning, and the nursing and tending functions. Friedships contribute to a successive expansion of the domain of social experiences and the adaptation to a social system so far unknown to the child represents ecological transistion which places special demands on the social competence, and which necessitates the developing of specific coping-strategies. The encouraging and the promoting of the social development on the one hand, and the relief from duty which simultansously helps to expand the own scope of action, those are the most important expectations mothers assign to the kindergarden; at the same time, these were the factors which contributed to the institutional education and training developing into an arrangement much desired by the parents and an experience typical for the children of our days.

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